

Interview with CAPT Paul Jacobs, former commanding officer of USS *Kirk* (DE-1087). Participated in Operation Frequent Wind, April 1975. Interviewed by Jan K. Herman, Historian, Navy Medical Department, Fairfax, VA, 29 December 2006.

When did you take command of *Kirk*?

In the summer of 1974. We were preparing to be deployed in a year. But that all speeded up because of the impending evacuation. We were ordered underway at max speed to rendezvous with the USS *Hancock* [CVA-19] in Hawaii. When we got to Hawaii, they were already loading supplies and helicopters onto the *Hancock*. She had a locked deck, which meant that nothing could fly off and nothing could move.

The *Hancock* was an old ship. The only flyable asset between us and the *Hancock* was my LAMPS [Light Airborne Multipurpose System] helicopter. The captain and I spoke each day about something. He got his planes moved around so when we got to the San Bernardino Straits, he could launch his jets and send them into Cubi Point to store them there. At that time, the *Midway* came down from Yokosuka. So I was plane-guarding two aircraft carriers in the middle of the San Bernardino Straits going 30 knots with junks all over the place. And half the time they were moving helicopters from the *Midway* to the *Hancock* at night.

Did you know what was going on at this point?

Yes. First we went to Cambodia for Operation Eagle Pull with the staff of DESRON 23 embarked in *Kirk*.

After the Cambodia episode was over we went to stand off Saigon. We were there for a few days and since we were not sure when Saigon was going to fall, we were ordered to Singapore with the *Hancock* for a port call. We had just arrived, tied up, and were ready to shut down the boilers when suddenly we were to get under way on an Emergency Underway to return to Saigon. *Kirk* got all my people back within 4 hours. If I had asked the crew to jump over a wall, they would have done it. We went down that river at night. I wasn't going to wait until sunrise.

We exited out of the river and headed north. It was like being on the freeway with all the shipping. I saw a supertanker and called them. I asked if there were any Maine Maritime graduates aboard. I was informed that the chief engineer was a graduate from Maine Maritime Academy. I then asked to speak with him. When he got on the radio, I found out that he remembered my dad. I said that I had a big favor to ask. "I don't want to keep dodging these junks while we head north. Can I pull in behind you and have you crank up your speed? I can make about 27 knots and I need to get up off of Saigon because it's about to fall."

He answered, "Be my guest. Haul in behind. We will increase speed to get through the ships so we can catch up with the *Hancock*."

When we arrived close to Saigon, we were ordered to position ourselves 2,000 yards off shore. Our job was to provide naval gunfire support if it was needed.

When was this?

Probably about April 28th [1975].

We then positioned ourselves 2,000 yards off shore. When we got there, we found we weren't the only ship there. Many navy ships were already sitting out there to support the evacuation. The Vietnamese were going to any ship they could get to.

What did you see?

There were thousands and thousands of small boats. It made my radar scope look pure white. It began to look like Dunkirk in reverse as these people were fleeing from Saigon. We took the Vietnamese people from small boats and helicopters. Some who came aboard from a helicopter would then say, "I am going back." Then they jumped back into a helicopter to head back to Vietnam.

Was this so they could go back and get more people?

No. Some couldn't make up their minds whether to go back to Vietnam to stay or not. We would normally see a blip on the radar, which was a boat. Then it was just solid white--boats trying to escape. They were trying to get to us or anything that was out there.

A helicopter, which had been over the embassy to protect the ambassador came out. It was night when he flew over the *Kirk*. My young ensign, Mr. Bruce Davidson (now a retired Navy captain) was the Officer of the Deck (OOD) on the bridge and heard the helicopter and knew it wasn't a Huey. And then all of a sudden I heard, "Captain to the bridge! Right full rudder! All engines ahead flank!" You see, I taught my crew to react and not wait for me. Mr. Davidson decided to turn off the amber lights and turn on the white lights so he could see where the helicopter went into the water.

The helicopter then set down in the water. Two of my enlisted guys jumped in the water, smashed the canopy, and got the two guys out. The pilot, LTCOL John W. Bowman, USMC, (Ret.) was the last guy to get out and he was underwater.

What kind of helicopter was it?

It was a Cobra and it had run out of gas.

So he set it down right near the ship.

He didn't know where he was when we got to him. Those two guys are alive today because of those quick reactions of Mr. Bruce Davidson.

That was our first action. We were getting so many refugees that there were more refugees than crew. When we had taken aboard as much as we could, we then offloaded them to one of the MSC ships. Then we'd return to our position.

What kind of small craft were these people arriving in?

Anything that would float. These small boats were loaded with anywhere from 30 to 50 people on each one. You could smell them even before they came alongside. We'd move the people to one side and then hose down the empty side to get rid of human waste and everything else. Then we had the people move to the clean side and then our crew would hose down the dirty side. Then we tried to feed them.

The other thing I was told to do was to remove all the live ordnance from the boats that were coming out to us. They had firearms, ammo, you name it.

What did you do with it?

I put it down near the transom--back at the rear of the ship. It was piled up 3 and 4 feet deep.

We were also told to get rid of all the animals. They wanted me to take pets from the kids and throw the animals over the side. So the XO said, "What do you wanna do, Captain?"

I replied, “You answer the message. Tell the powers that be that the action is done and don’t do a goddam thing!” Had I followed that order, I would have had a riot.

What shape were these people in?

Filthy. They probably hadn’t had a bath in a week. And they had no food. One boat came alongside and, as we tried to transfer some water and supplies over, there was pushing and shoving on the Vietnamese boat and a woman was accidentally pushed over the side. She was crushed between the boat and our ship. One of the Vietnamese officers aboard the boat suddenly took out a gun and shot the man who pushed her. I’m sure the man hadn’t pushed her on purpose but that’s what happened. The incident, which took place right in front of us, certainly calmed things down and quelled the riot.

How did you the refugees aboard the *Kirk*?

We had to pull one pregnant woman up over the side of the ship. Actually, we wound up with about eight or nine pregnant women. Since then, we’ve been able to identify three of the pregnant women. They were anywhere from 7 or 8 months pregnant. There were no births on the ship. Most of the refugees were down there, crying, dehydrated, and seasick. It was a hundred degrees. Thank God the seas were flat with not a ripple. Had it been rough, we would have hurt a lot of people.

So I put these pregnant women in the first class lounge. My guys were attending them. Finally, I took a piece of pipe and with my Vietnamese interpreter, I hit the bulkhead with the pipe. Whang! On the bulkhead. There was dead silence. I said to the interpreter, “You tell them to get busy and have one of these babies on board. That’s your ticket to the U.S.”

Well, they all began to smile. I was trying to help them morale wise and also make it easier for the enlisted guys to take care of them.

What’s the story with Seaman Cox?

He was one of the aviation seamen up on the flight deck. I told him to get another buddy and take care of one of the Vietnamese women. He said, “What do I do?”

“First, you need to give her a bath. And then you walk her around. You can’t let her sit down. Then you feed her some saltine crackers to help with the seasickness. Take some of your shirts and make her a maternity gown. You and your buddy will be responsible for her until we get into Subic Bay.”

Well, we’ve been able to find her. She now lives in Long Beach. Her daughter went to Long Beach State and graduated with honors. She came with a daughter and son to the reunion in 2005. And Seaman Cox was her escort at the reunion in Orlando, FL. He now works for Raytheon down in Texas.

How many people would you estimate were on the boat where the near riot took place?

Maybe 600. They completely covered the boat. These were the kinds of things my sailors were confronted with. In just a few hours all of us--officers and men--had transformed the *Kirk* from a man-of-war to a humanitarian ship.

These refugees were probably dehydrated, seasick, dirty, and hungry. They obviously required medical care.

This movement of refugees lasted for 2 or 3 days. Then we began sinking the boats they abandoned because they were a menace to navigation. After we completed sinking the abandoned boats, we started moving east toward Subic Bay.

I then received a call from the 7th Fleet Admiral. He himself said to come alongside the flagship, USS *Blue Ridge* [LCC-19]. He told me that he was going to send me a man named Richard L. Armitage and that I was to take orders from him and act in the highest traditions of the United States Navy.

Apparently, 39 Vietnamese ships were at Con Son Island, maybe 35 miles from Saigon. The Vietnamese Navy was there--the Vietnamese CNO and other key personnel. The admiral went on: "Mr. Armitage knows these folks and speaks the language. Your job is to escort these 39 ships east to Subic Bay."

My job then was to get these ships underway, feed the people aboard, provide them with medical care, and do it all with no help from any other ship. It was initially the *Kirk*'s job alone.

How many other Navy ships were going to help you do this?

Just us. Just *Kirk*. A couple of days later they sent the USS *Cook* to offer us assistance.

So you were to go to this island, round up these ships. . .

And do it all covertly.

To secretly herd them together and get them moving to the Philippines.

Yes. I told Armitage and my executive officer, LCDR Richard McKenna, that we would go into the island right after dark. I told him I'd drop him, the executive officer, and 8 or 10 of my senior enlisted men so they could make an assessment. What would I need to get these ships started? Could the Vietnamese personnel get them underway or would I have to do that?

And these were all kinds of vessels.

Swift boats, landing craft--everything that was left of the Vietnamese Navy.

So Armitage was a naval officer?

Yes. He worked for the CIA at the time and I learned that he was a graduate of the Naval Academy. So I took him aboard and headed west back to Vietnam. We had a day or so of steaming so he, the XO, and I started planning how we would accomplish our mission.

I said, "Let's send you and the key guys over there. You pick out the key Vietnamese personnel and bring them back to the ship. Then we'll stand off. You'll have all day, the rest of that night, and all the next day to plan how you're going to do this. Would the *Kirk* have to take any of these ships under tow?"

When we arrived, the Vietnamese CNO and his staff came aboard and we planned the operation. I went back the next night and offloaded them and 40 or 50 of my enlisted men--electricians, enginemen, etc.--to help get the engines on these boats started. Once they got them all up and running the next morning, we then headed east--all 39 of them.

These Vietnamese vessels of all types were loaded with refugees, many of them families of these officials. I have no doubt that they all would have been slaughtered had they stayed behind. At very least, the communists would have been put them in reeducation camps.

So you got them all together and got them to Subic.

Because we could only make about 5 knots, it took 10 days or so of steaming.

So it was just *Kirk* that was escorting all these vessels?

Yes.

And you probably had a language problem. Was there anyone on the *Kirk* who could speak Vietnamese?

We probably had about 20 of our people who spoke at least some Vietnamese.

Who fed these people?

We did.

You had enough supplies to feed the people on all 39 vessels?

I used my whaleboat and some of their boats to distribute rice. I found two Vietnamese ladies who were married to U.S. officers or enlisted men who could speak English. I put one on the bridge as my communicator to talk to the Vietnamese ships. I told them what course I was on, etc. At night the Vietnamese vessels were right in close; during the day, they'd spread out. Thank God, it was flat, dead calm. If it hadn't been, we would have lost a lot of them.

Each of those 39 ships had to have a U.S. officer or petty officer aboard and I could communicate with him.

This was after the fall of Saigon. Were you now into May.

I don't think we got to Subic Bay until May 6th or 7th. In the meantime, helicopters were landing on *Kirk*. I had a LAMPS helicopter on board, which I got out of the way by putting it in the hangar. When we arrived at Subic Bay, we had four Hueys, two sticking out each side of the hangar deck. There was another one sitting on the deck and one on the fantail

I assume then that many of the Vietnamese you got also came on helicopters.

Yes they did. And they kept arriving even after we began steaming to Subic escorting those 39 Vietnamese ships and boats. My young landing signal officer helped those Vietnamese pilots who had never landed on a moving ship. And he did it successfully.

We had one dangerous incident. The rotor of one helicopter hit the tail of the another, and shrapnel flew through the air. Some of it made holes in my flight deck. But that landing signal officer never flinched because he saw kids on that helicopter. Even with that accident, the pilot was able to land it.

How many people would you see on those incoming helicopters?

They were loaded. I would guess there would be 20 or 25 packed in those Hueys. We'd then take anything we could salvage off them and push them over the side. I think we landed 16 altogether. The last ones that landed were the ones we kept.

What did you do about medical care for the refugees?

Let me tell you what our corpsman did. A line had snapped and a Vietnamese man on one of the boats had incurred a compound fracture of his leg. He was rushed to the *Kirk* and Chief [Stephen] Burwinkle was working on him. Even so, he told me the man's injury was so serious that he would have to be evacuated to a ship with a doctor aboard.

About the same time all this was going on, we had the accident with the two Hueys. So now I had two damaged Hueys. I asked my LAMPS pilots, "Can you guys make one of these fly?" When they said they could, I said, "Well, you've got 30 minutes."

In that time, they took the good tail off of one and put it on the other. Now we had one good helicopter. The one they had scavenged from went over the side. Chief Burwinkle then got into the flyable helicopter with the injured man, and they flew him over to the *Mobile*, which was 15 or 20 minutes away. When they returned, they dumped that helo over the side.

Afterward, the doctor from the *Blue Ridge* called me and said, "Hey, that doctor of yours did a helluva job with that guy's leg."

I said, "He's not a doctor; he's a corpsman."

He replied, "I still say he did a helluva job. He saved the man's leg."

This incident happened while you were shepherding the boats to Subic.

Yes. When we had medical incidents at night, I had to prioritize them. I had my chief corpsman and a striker in the captain's gig or whaleboat go from one ship to another checking on the refugees. The Vietnamese woman on the bridge coordinated this operation. She would tell me what case was serious and which boat needed our corpsman. From the bridge, I kept track of all the emergency medical cases on a tally sheet so I could direct Chief Burwinkle to go here instead of there. My officers or enlisted men who were on those vessels would radio the medical emergency to us. Then I was making medical judgements myself from the bridge 24 hours a day. Where were Chief Burwinkle's services most needed?

"What ship are you on and where are you located," I would ask? "Give me a bearing to *Kirk*." I had the names of all the Vietnamese ships on a sheet and generally where they were.

How long did this go on?

It went on 24 hours a day.

One corpsman?

One corpsman and a striker.

So these men were going to these ships every day and holding what amounted to sick call.

Yes. They went around to all these ships in a whaleboat or the gig. We also used several Vietnamese swift boats to check up on the other vessels.

How many days was all this going on?

I'm guessing 8 to 10 days. We were also feeding them and getting them water. In fact, water was the big thing. We were making water, putting it in 5-gallon cans, and sending it to them.

Water and rice.

Yes. That was pretty much it.

Your corpsman was one hell of a busy guy.

Unbelievable! I only knew about the emergencies he handled. There were many other things he did I didn't know anything about.

What kinds of things was the chief treating?

Everything. He was tending to a young boy. When we got him he was limp as a rag. So the chief started giving him antibiotics to see if he could bring him back, which he did. Two days later, the kid was running around the ship. But then he had a relapse and died.

We decided to hold a military funeral at midnight and bury him at sea. We actually found the mom, dad, and all the siblings--nine children--eight girls and one boy, their only son. We didn't have a chaplain aboard so I was the chaplain for the ceremony. We're now trying to find that family and invite them to the reunion in October.

Did the Chief have enough medical supplies to take care of all those people?

After we expended all our medical supplies, the Air Force dropped us 55-gallon drums filled with medical supplies. We then sent our boat out, wrestled those drums aboard, and brought them back to the *Kirk*.

There are no words to describe how my chief corpsman reacted or what he did. He was awarded the Navy's Meritorious Service Medal.

Where does he live?

He lives in Florida but will be up here for the reunion in October.

Was anyone taking pictures of any of these activities?

Yes. People are putting pictures together that were taken and we're getting pictures of things we didn't even know about.

What happened after you arrived in Subic?

We couldn't get to the pier in Subic because of the helicopters sticking out the side. I also had a boat tied up alongside and we were also towing another. So when we went into Subic Bay at 5 knots, tugs had to come out and retrieve these two boats.

Why did you keep the helicopters?

One was a pristine new helicopter that belonged to Air America. We had pulled it up alongside the flight deck with its tail stuck out on the port side. We put another on the other side, and another down on the fantail.

I'll bet that all these years later, those lucky refugees you rescued are still grateful for having been picked up by the *Kirk*.

Those Vietnamese just cannot pay their respects or express their appreciation enough for what the officers and men of the *Kirk* did for them. When we got to Guam I went to the refugee camp there and found the mother of the young boy who died aboard the *Kirk*. She ran up to me and got down on her knees and said, "What you did was unbelievable!" These people are so gracious. They are dying to pay their respects to the United States Navy. The Navy could, if they wanted to, have the reunion of all reunions in San Diego aboard the *Midway* for Operation Frequent Wind ships and sailors and they would pack that place with both Vietnamese and Navy.

Did you retire from the Navy?

Yes. I retired as a captain in August of 1984 with 28 years.

What do you do now?

I'm chief financial officer and senior vice president of the Federal Resources Corporation in Fairfax, VA.

Addendum

(I found this age information from a Family Gram we sent home. I thought you would find it helpful.)

ENLISTED #	RATE	AVERAGE AGE
87	Non-rated	21
56	3 rd Class	22
36	2 nd Class	25
22	1 st Class	32
15	Chief Petty Officers	34
216		24.1

OFFICERS	RANK	AVERAGE AGE
6	Ensigns	24
7	LTJG	26
5	LT	28
1	LCDR	33
1	CDR	38
20		26.67